

Evaluation Report

Libby Community Advisory Group Libby, Montana

Community Advisory Group Formation

EPA facilitated the formation of a Community Advisory Group (CAG) that has met regularly, usually twice a month, since January 2000. Five CAG members and four people who attend CAG meetings volunteered to provide input for this review, which is intended as a mid-course review of the CAG's operation and effectiveness. Community Involvement Coordinator (CIC) Wendy Thomi provided her perspective and additional information in a telephone interview.

Wendy said the CAG was formed quickly in response to the volatile emotions and community polarization in Libby. She helped the community form a group by inviting a representative and diverse group of about 20 community leaders, who were identified through community interviews, to an informational meeting in January 2000. Participants were asked to suggest other leaders who should be involved, and these people were invited to the group's second organizational meeting.

Wendy facilitated the first two organizational meetings and hired a neutral third-party facilitator to lead the group after that, even though several participants suggested that she continue to lead the group. She said neutral third-party facilitation was necessary because of the emotional nature of the subjects discussed by the group and the potential for conflict.

The group agreed that CAG members would consist of self-selected volunteers and that membership would be open to anyone wishing to join, as long as they were willing to accept member responsibilities. They defined these responsibilities as:

- sharing information provided by EPA and other members with others in the community;
- bringing back to the CAG questions, concerns, rumors, and information from community members;
- attending CAG meetings; and
- having their name, address, and telephone number published in the local newspapers so that residents could contact them.

The group also sought broad representation of various segments of the community. There currently are about 25 members. The group has not established officers or elected a chair.

Everyone who participated in the evaluation agreed that EPA's role in the formation of the CAG was both appropriate and helpful. EPA sponsored the initial CAG meeting, prepared and distributed information about the CAG and how to participate, suggested appropriate members, and helped the group decide how it would operate. They also noted that EPA provided a copy of the *CAG Toolkit* and other useful information, helped arrange for a meeting place, hired the facilitator, and provided information about potential sources of federal and state grants and assistance. When asked what was most helpful, only two of the nine respondents pointed to specific actions (providing a startup procedure and hiring a facilitator). Most cited EPA's expertise and experience helping communities to form CAGs and promote community involvement. They praised EPA for helping to guide discussion and evolution of the group.

While the group did not formally draft a mission statement, they agreed that the purpose of the CAG is to provide a conduit for formal and regular two-way communication between the people of Libby and EPA. Since then, the group's mission has continued to evolve over time. After a few meetings, members decided that they wanted to participate in the decision-making process on behalf of the groups they represented and

on behalf of the community. They agreed on majority rule to determine the recommendations the group would make to EPA. Wendy explained to them that EPA could not delegate the decision-making responsibility, but was eager to hear and consider the group's recommendations, including minority views. When asked a year later to describe the group's mission, most said the group's purpose was to provide a link between the community and EPA (and other agencies involved in the cleanup), and to provide a forum for community views. Only one person talked specifically about the CAG's advisory role, and four people described the CAG's purpose in terms of "getting help for Libby," "getting the job done," "healing," or cited specific goals, including meeting cleanup and health care needs. These responses echoed the issues identified by respondents as most important to the Libby community prior to CAG formation: getting help for victims of asbestos exposure, meeting healthcare needs, getting the contamination cleaned up, and economic recovery and revitalization of the community. One person also cited accountability as a major issue. No one mentioned NPL listing as an issue or goal.

CAG Operation

The group meets every two weeks during most of the year and once a month at other times. CAG meetings are advertised in the newspaper, and the CAG has published lists of CAG members and phone numbers. EPA prints a regular "Q&A" feature in local newspapers with input from CAG members. CAG meeting summaries and meeting announcements are mailed to CAG members and posted on EPA's web site.

Diverse representatives from the community continue to set the agendas and discuss issues relevant to the investigation and cleanup of asbestos in Libby. Meetings include discussions of organizational issues, briefings from EPA and other agencies on site activities and issues of concern, and responding to questions from CAG members and residents. Frequent topics include the Community Medical Testing Program, long term health care, and economic revitalization.

In addition to members of the CAG, about 50 community residents attend each meeting. Several respondents said they thought community turnout for CAG meetings could be improved, but others were satisfied with public participation. All agreed that people who attend the meetings actively participate and express their views freely. One person noted that public participation in the meetings has improved since the CAG began allowing comments throughout the meeting instead of only at the end. "Good facilitation helps," said another.

All respondents were aware of the range of administrative support EPA provides to the CAG. This includes:

- preparing and placing public notices in local newspapers;
- helping CAG members prepare and distribute news releases, fact sheets and other materials;
- helping prepare and maintain a mailing list; providing mailing services and postage;
- duplicating and distributing meeting summaries, site-related information, and review comments by CAG members; and
- arranging for meeting space.

The facilitator writes meeting summaries and submits them to Wendy for approval and distribution. All agreed that EPA's support and assistance to the group is helpful, and declined to pinpoint a single form of assistance as the most useful. Instead, respondents cited the expertise and background information EPA (and other agencies) shares with the community (especially the agency reviews at the start of each CAG meeting), and EPA's willingness to listen and respond to all community suggestions and requests.

Respondents said that the CAG gets most of its technical information and advice directly from EPA, and from the state, ATSDR, and other agencies that attend CAG meetings. Most said this access to technical information and advice is at least adequate to meet the group needs. They said EPA's OSC has done an excellent job interpreting information and providing technical assistance to the community. The CAG has requested technical assistance through the Technical Outreach Services to Communities (TOSC) program,

but had not yet received this assistance when the evaluation was conducted. Since that time, Wendy reported that a TOSC representative participated in at least one CAG meeting. She thought the assistance provided thus far has not been tailored enough to the special circumstances in Libby.

When asked what else EPA could do to assist the community's efforts, one person said the CAG needs a full-time administrator. Another suggested that an EPA representative be posted in Libby so the Agency could have daily access to the community. Most importantly, they were confident that EPA would respond to any needs that arise. In the words of one respondent: "EPA and the current team has been up-front, honest, and professional. Stay that way."

Several people suggested specific changes in the way the CAG operates:

- Members should be screened more selectively.
- An attorney should be recruited to serve on the CAG.
- Give members more time to review issues before voting at meetings.
- Get a better sound system and an official court reporter to transcribe meeting minutes.
- Hold luncheon meetings to make the group more businesslike.

Overall Community Advisory Group Effectiveness

Respondents agreed that the CAG has helped members and other Libby residents to become more informed about and involved in the investigation and cleanup process. They said the CAG provides a clearinghouse for information and a forum for expressing views, frustrations, and concerns. One member of the community who is not a CAG member said: "The CAG is *the* influence in decisions about the site. The CAG is the community."

Clearly, many people think that maintaining effective communication between various segments of the Libby community remains a challenge. They acknowledged the complexity of the site and of the overall situation in Libby, and said the group already has made many advances. One person said that at first the membership was concerned with personal agendas, but now addresses the concerns of the community as a whole. Two respondents said the CAG has—and has not—changed the relationship between the community and EPA because particular segments of the community, including business interests, still have not been reached. One of them put it this way: "We still have a business section that wants to see the ordeal over as soon as possible and asbestos victims who want what happened here to be remembered forever. Both are right." Wendy Thomi said EPA continues to meet with representatives of the business community separately until they can join in the CAG meetings.

Seven of nine respondents said that formation of the CAG changed the relationship between the community and EPA. Their comments cited the sincere level of trust that has developed between EPA and the community and noted that more people feel that lines of communication have been opened and now believe that EPA is working with them. When asked if the community has more influence in site decisions than it did before formation of the CAG, one person stated: "The CAG is *the* influence in the community." Others said they thought the community had more influence in site decisions since the CAG was formed. Two of the nine were not sure: one said "it feels like more influence, but I'm not really sure," and the other said it was still too early to tell.

All but one (who said he didn't know) said they thought the community as a whole has benefitted from the CAG's involvement at the site. They noted that the CAG has helped residents better understand what is happening to the community and helped keep site issues at the forefront. One noted that the CAG organized and presented a list of community concerns to Senator Baucus for Congressional action. Another said, "The CAG has requested many things that helped educate the community about what has happened to this town and has gained many programs that will benefit the whole community."

Wrap-up/Other Comments

When asked what suggestions they would offer to other communities interested in forming a CAG, nearly all said they would encourage them to form a CAG. Specific suggestions included being selective in membership and making sure that the group includes the true leaders in the community. Another recommended that the public be allowed to participate fully in CAG meetings, rather than just at the end. Another suggestion was to formalize the organization so that it would be eligible to apply for an EPA Technical Assistance Grant (TAG).

Summary

The major points raised by respondents in the evaluation included the following:

- CAG members and community residents were very satisfied with the CAG and with EPA's role in the community in general. One said EPA was "a savior to this community." While others were more restrained in their comments, many stressed that EPA has been open, honest, and up-front with the community. Several made a point of praising the commitment and professionalism of OSC Paul Peronard and CIC Wendy Thomi, who they said listen and respond to their concerns and can be depended on to provide credible, timely, and understandable information to the CAG and to the community.
- All agreed that EPA's role in formation of the CAG was appropriate and helpful. They appreciated EPA's expertise and experience helping communities to form CAGs and promote community involvement. They praised the involvement of the site's OSC and CIC in helping to guide the group.
- Participants agreed that EPA's support and assistance to the group continues to be helpful. Rather than pinpointing specific forms of assistance as the most useful, respondents cited the expertise and background information EPA shares with the community and willingness of EPA staff to listen and respond to all community suggestions and requests. They also said EPA has done an excellent job interpreting and communicating technical information to the community.
- While the group does not have a formal, written mission statement, all who participated in the evaluation shared a clear, basic understanding of the CAG's purpose. They agreed that the group's purpose is to provide a conduit for formal and regular two-way communication between the people of Libby and EPA. Only one person said specifically that the CAG's mission includes participating directly in the decision-making process.
- While they were not asked specifically to comment on the value of neutral facilitation to the group, respondents agreed that meetings run smoothly and stay on track, and good facilitation has been very helpful to the group.
- The CAG gets most of its technical information and advice directly from EPA, the State, ATSDR, and other agencies that attend CAG meetings. Most thought this access to technical information and advice is at least adequate to meet the group needs. The CAG has requested technical assistance through the TOSC program, but had not yet received TOSC assistance when the evaluation was conducted.
- Respondents agreed that the CAG has been an effective way of getting everyone with an interest in site decisions to talk to each other, and that the CAG has helped residents to become more informed about and involved in the investigation and cleanup process. They said the CAG provides a clearinghouse for information and a forum for expressing views, frustrations, and concerns.
- Most said formation of the CAG has improved the relationship between the community and EPA. The group has opened lines of communication and the community now trusts EPA and feels that the Agency

is working with them. However, the business community still has not embraced the CAG. EPA continues to encourage business interests to work with the CAG. In the meantime, EPA continues to meet separately with business representatives.